

State of Rural Canada 2021

Opportunities, Recovery & Resiliency in Changing Times

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Photo Credit: Danielle Robinson



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British Columbia's Rural Landscape

The first edition of the State of Rural Canada described rural British Columbia (BC) as a dynamic and evolving landscape. This remains an apt description. Who and what are rural is not static.

The current estimated population of British Columbia is 5.1 million.¹ Depending on whether you use Statistics Canada's definition of "rural and small town" (<1,000) or

the criteria used by the Province of British Columbia when determining if a community is eligible for rural funding programs (<25,000), the size of BC's rural population is between 600,000² to 1,000,000 people.^{1,2} Rural BC covers upwards of 275 census subdivisions, includes incorporated and unincorporated communities, and is spread out across eight development regions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Development Regions of British Columbia³



Qualitatively, there is more variation in defining rural BC, depending on who is being asked and the situation. A coarse filter for rural and urban would see urban as Greater Vancouver and Victoria, and rural as everything else - although the small communities within these urban regions may disagree. Communities like Nelson, Williams Lake, and Terrace can be both rural (provincially) and urban (locally). Distance also plays a role, with differences along a continuum from urban-adjacent communities to remote (fly-in or boat-in) communities. Access to services (e.g., health) and critical infrastructure (e.g., broadband), local economic diversification (e.g., single industry, natural resource based), geography (e.g., mountainous terrain, coastal islands), as well as cultural and social

factors all add further layers to the complexity of the rural landscape in BC.

What is clear is that there is substantial variation across rural BC. For every "rural BC" trend or observation there is a community, or more likely several communities, for which this may not ring true. To summarize the opportunities, recovery, and resilience across rural BC is a challenging task; particularly while also meaningfully including the many First Nations and other Indigenous peoples on whose unceded traditional lands this province is built. Our aim is to provide a thoughtful provincial overview, while recognizing and acknowledging the breadth of rural BC.

British Columbia's Rural Realities

There are common themes that are almost ubiquitously important across BC. Demographics, local economic development, climate change, housing, workforce, technology and innovation, and – most recently – the response to COVID-19. Each of these comes with opportunities and challenges and is part of a complicated, overlapping, and integrated landscape. The variation of rural BC nuances how each theme is experienced, and the resulting trends, opportunities, and challenges. While there are similarities, each manifest differently across rural BC. Fundamental rural challenges, including capacity limitations, large distances, and small populations, as well as place-specific factors change the context of these conversations.

Variation across rural BC is also seen across the economic structure of communities. Natural resource sectors are an important part of the BC economy. Rural communities are more likely to have the highest dependence on these sectors, particularly those communities with populations under 10,000.⁴ However, with the growth of economic opportunities from tourism, cannabis, technology, and remote work, the economic structure of rural communities in BC is changing. Rural BC is, in fact, more economically diverse than perhaps expected.

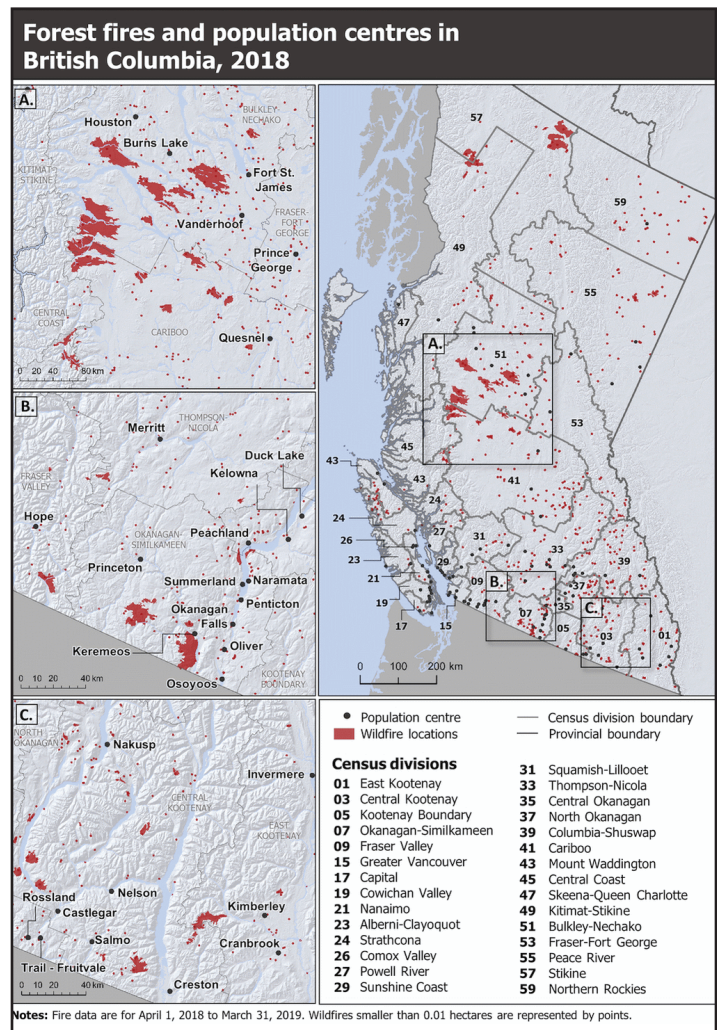
We have identified four examples with broad applicability across rural BC to explore trends, challenges, and opportunities in further detail.

Trend: Climate Change Accelerated

Record-breaking wildfires and more frequent flooding have seriously impacted rural BC over the past several years.⁵ In May 2018, intense rain combined with mountain snowmelt caused the Kettle and Granby Rivers to overflow their banks. The flooding event in Grand Forks was the worst flooding BC had seen in 70 years and 60 cm higher than ever recorded as homes, businesses, and farms were submerged in flood waters.⁶ Other regions (e.g., Thompson-Okanagan) also experienced historic flood levels in 2018.⁷

The floodwaters had not even receded before the worst wildfire season recorded in provincial history began. The 2018 fire season surpassed the previously record setting 2017 fire season with 2,115 fires burning 1.35 million hectares (ha), incurring \$615 million in fire suppression costs⁸, and releasing an estimated 190 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions.⁹

Figure 2: Forest fires and Population Centres in British Columbia, 2018¹⁰



These events caused thousands of evacuations and damage to private property, infrastructure, natural and cultural resources, and the environment.^{6,10} The 2018 fires impacted over 400,000 ha of parks and protected areas, over 300,000 ha designated as wildlife habitat areas, over 200,000 ha in scenic areas, and about 130,000 ha in old growth management areas.¹¹ Related cultural services (e.g., recreation, aesthetic appreciation) were also negatively impacted even in regions without fire damage, since the high fire risk resulted in campfire bans, off-road vehicle prohibitions, limitations on outdoor activity due to heavy smoke, and even full backcountry closures.⁸

There were also significant economic consequences. Tourism revenue loss was \$139 million from the 2017 fire season alone, with cancellations because of smoke, road closures, and evacuation alerts/orders.¹² Merchantable timber went up in smoke. Agricultural sector effects included impacts on Crown rangeland used

i Note that these areas can overlap. One hectare can provide for one or more values.

in cattle ranching and crop damage such as smoke taint (unpleasant burnt flavours) in grapes.¹³ Small businesses – a critical element of the rural economy – faced barriers to rebuilding in areas hardest hit by the wildfires because of displaced staff, lost customers, and reduced revenue.¹⁴

The social-cultural, economic, and environmental costs to rural BC are expected to increase due to climate change, accelerating the frequency and severity of forest fires.⁵ Future flooding is also impacted by climate change, through changes in precipitation and temperature, as well as by fire damage increasing the risk of soil erosion and flooding in downstream communities.¹⁵ Rural communities need to be prepared on multiple fronts, by having broad climate change adaptation and economic resilience plans, as well as specific wildfire protection plans that include treatment or management of fuel in surrounding land.

Challenge: Forest Sector Crisis

While natural resources can be economic opportunities, dependence on natural resources can make communities vulnerable to rapid changes in these sectors. While it is communities that are impacted, the source of these changes is typically outside community control, including global factors (e.g., commodity prices) and provincial factors (e.g., policy or regulatory change). BC's forest sector is one example. The forest sector is critically important to BC, both past and present. There is no region where the forest sector is absent. Many communities are (or were) anchored around a sawmill or pulp and paper mill. The forest sector has also experienced restructuring over decades that continues to have an impact today.

In 2019 the forest sector experienced a rapid downturn, brought on by a combination of impacts from mountain pine beetle and wildfires on fibre supply, the ongoing softwood lumber trade dispute with the United States, high costs, and low prices, all complicated by past restructuring, labour disputes, changes to timber supply areas, and a changing regulatory and policy environment.^{16,17,18} Rural communities across BC saw the permanent closure of mills, as well as temporary and permanent curtailments. At the worst point of 2019, over 6,000 workers from at least 34 mills across BC were directly impacted, and many more were indirectly impacted through knock on effects to contractors and supporting businesses. Impacts were felt across BC, although they were significantly greater in the Cariboo region.

Beyond the obvious economic impacts, communities and individuals faced social and mental health impacts (e.g.,

increased violence, substance abuse). This was particularly severe in areas where there have been multiple recent major events (e.g., fires, floods). Mental health struggles are particularly challenging in rural places where there is a lack of local supports, long wait times, or other barriers to access.

In response to the forest sector crisis, the Provincial Government implemented various support programs (e.g., the Forest Employment Program, temporary deferral of stumpage fees), and impacted communities also identified a wide range of responses, including identification of new opportunities.¹⁹ 20 Continuing changes within the forest sector are expected. Some are simple, such as the positive impacts of the recent rise in lumber prices. Others are more complex, bringing opportunity and uncertainty, including implementation of BC's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, changes to Old Growth management, provincial timber supply review, as well as changes in technology and future wildfire risk.^{19,21} Communities need support from the Province to adapt to this changing landscape. A strong Provincial vision for a renewed and sustainable forest sector would provide clarity and direction for rural communities.

Opportunities: The Digital Economy

Connectivity increasingly impacts all facets of daily life, including access to employment, training, and services.²² Connectivity offers rural BC a wide range of opportunities, including new resident attraction, as well as the development and expansion of businesses and industry.

BC is considered a leader in connectivity and technology in Canada, with many rural examples of community and regional connectivity initiatives, as well as a strong rural tech sector.²³ 24 Between 2016-2018 the number of tech businesses increased in the North Coast development region, as well as in the Mainland/Southwest, Thompson-Okanagan, and Kootenay development regions.²⁴ However, rural growth can be hard to calculate as rural specific data is lacking. Data at the development region level is typically more reflective of major urban centres. For example, trends from the Thompson-Okanagan better reflect Kelowna and Kamloops than the rural areas.

There is growing access to digital skills training and capacity building across rural BC. As businesses worked to shift online during COVID-19, temporary programs like Innovate BC's Digital Economy: Rapid Response and Recovery were rolled out across the province. However, access to connectivity remains unequal across rural BC, meaning that while opportunities are growing, there are those who are being left behind. Additionally,

there is variation in the digital divide that requires an intersectional lens – for example, working to account for not only differences in access and skills between rural and urban, but also between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.²⁵

Despite BC being considered a leader, rural inequities and connectivity challenges related to connectivity have been ongoing for years, and are expected to continue. Barriers like long distances and challenging terrain mean that connectivity costs are high.²⁵ According to a 2019 report, 93% of BC households had access to internet that meets the current CRTC standard.²⁵ However, rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities continued to lack access (35% and 33% respectively).²⁵ Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that reported “available” internet speeds do not always reflect user experiences, suggesting fewer households actually have adequate access than what is reported. While internet access in BC has been improving relative to comparable jurisdictions in Canada, affordability is worse. Rural BC pays an estimated 23% markup on connectivity services compared to urban areas.²⁵

The growing digital economy brings both opportunities and challenges. Presently, the landscape across BC is unequal – with many communities lacking access to basic internet speeds, and missing out on opportunities as a result. Communities with growing numbers of remote workers and a growing tech sector face challenges as well as benefits, necessitating good planning and collaboration.

COVID-19 in Rural British Columbia

While initial outbreaks of COVID-19 were concentrated in urban areas, by 2021 rural communities were also experiencing outbreaks, particularly in the Northern Health region, which had more than 20 new infections per day per 100,000 residents, more than any other health region in the province.²⁵

The initial province-wide shut down in early spring 2020 greatly impacted employment and supply chains for retail and service sector businesses, as well as major industrial employers in rural BC.²⁶ When rural and small town employment is compared to the average for the same month in previous years, rural and small town BC reported a difference of -25% in April 2020.²⁷ Work from home alternatives were particularly limited in areas without broadband and with limited childcare. By September 2020, employment rates had improved, but BC continued to have the fourth largest rural small town COVID-19 employment gap when compared to September, 2019.²⁸ This gap disproportionately impacted women.²⁸ The tourism

sector has been especially hard hit.⁴ Targeted funds to help rural businesses and communities recover from COVID-19's economic impacts are being administered through multiple channels, including through the Rural Economic Recovery²⁸ fund, through Community Futures,²⁹ as well as the Northern Development Initiative Trust,³⁰ the Economic Trust of the Southern Interior³¹ and the Island Coastal Economic Trust.³² By April 2021, BC's rural and small town employment was -2.7% compared to the average for the same month in previous years.

The provincial government prioritized vaccines on First Nations reserves due to limited housing and health care facilities and distrust in the health system.³³ By early March 2021, more than 24,000 Indigenous people in 113 communities had received a COVID-19 vaccine. In addition, about 12,000 residents of Prince Rupert and Port Edward on the North Coast were among the first communities in Canada to vaccinate all eligible residents in response to persistent clusters of the virus.³⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted rural inequities in health and childcare services, housing, and broadband access. COVID-19 also revealed the vulnerability of the tourism sector, a sector previously seen as a less vulnerable way to diversify rural economies. However, the pandemic also re-characterized urban features like density and busy cultural attractions as threatening, while rural characteristics such as sparse population and access to natural environments became increasingly attractive especially for remote workers.³⁵ Counter-urbanization patterns have accelerated as a result.^{36,37} While new resident attraction is an opportunity, rural migration also has challenges, including increased real estate competition and rising house prices. Awareness of power relations in the political reconstruction of rural place will be critical, as are new approaches to rural services and supports.³¹ Local responses to COVID-19 varied across BC, including many unique, place-based approaches like that of the Kitimat area described in case study #1.

Case Study 1: A Rural Response to COVID-19: Kitimat

By Greg Halseth and Laura Ryser

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the community of Kitimat has faced a number of issues related to interruptions to reconciliation processes, the influx of mobile workers, and business capacity. Ongoing efforts to strengthen collaborative relationships with the Haisla in Kitimaat Village slowed down due to the health care checkpoint into the Kitimaat Village and the increasing number of people working from home. COVID-19 exposures had been reported at local camps due to the mobile workforces engaged in LNG projects. While some operators discouraged their workers from travelling to town, the community is experiencing more interaction with mobile workers.

In 2020, the District of Kitimat created two funds to strengthen the resiliency of local businesses and organizations during the pandemic. The first fund was valued at more than \$500,000 to support local businesses. Through this program, the Chamber of Commerce helped to distribute PPE (e.g., hand sanitizers,

stickers) supplies to local businesses. For a town located on the coast of BC, the local government also strategically placed umbrellas around town for people waiting outside during rainfall events. A full-time local government staff member was also available during business hours to answer questions about COVID-19 and related programs. A second phase of this program will extend into 2021 and expand supports for local businesses who wish to develop or strengthen their on-line business model by developing a website, moving to a digital sales platform, increasing search engine optimization, or strengthening strategic on-line marketing. Support for local businesses was also strengthened through a local Christmas campaign. The second fund, also valued at \$500,000, was designed to strengthen the resiliency of community groups. Potential support included providing PPE to support the daily operations of community non-profits.

Case Study 2: Resilient Indigenous Language Revitalization

BC's growing Indigenous population is also growing in Indigenous language proficiency.³⁹ From cultural immersion environments for young children and their parents,⁴⁰ to a new Bachelor of Nsyilxcn language fluency program at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus,⁴¹ and Indigenous language-based tourism projects in Haida Gwaii,⁴² many Indigenous communities in rural and small town BC are working to revive their languages. Ensuring diverse Indigenous languages flourish for future generations is essential because each contains unique wisdom, knowledge, and world views.

Language revitalization is part of the cultural revival working to overcome the effects of colonization, including the devastating cultural losses from previous epidemics like influenza, measles, whooping cough, and smallpox which ravaged BC's Indigenous population.⁴³

The First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC),⁴⁴ a provincial Crown Corporation which administers the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Program, highlights the creative ways Indigenous language revitalization projects in rural BC modeled resiliency by

incorporating new technology and adjusting processes to safely continue language revitalization work during the present pandemic.⁴⁵

For example, pre-COVID-19, a Kwak'waka Indigenous language revitalization program in Northern Vancouver Island involved meeting weekly with Elders to record words and phrases. When in-person sessions became impossible during COVID-19, microphones were provided for Elders to connect to tablets, so they could continue to translate and record words. The language was then shared online in written form with a link to the recorded pronunciation so speakers and learners could hear the spoken words. More than 60 hours of new recordings have been made that were not previously available in a digital format. In fact, there has been increased community interest in connecting with the language online during the pandemic using social media.⁴⁵

The Future of Rural in British Columbia

This chapter concludes with an overview of the future of rural in BC, speaking to the lessons, policies, and practices needed to support rural resilience in the long term. Of all the potential needs to support a resilient rural future, two stand out: reconciliation and adaptation to change.

Ongoing Reconciliation

In 2016, there were 270,585 Indigenous people in British Columbia, making up 5.9% of the population.⁴⁶ Almost 70% of Indigenous people in BC live outside large urban centres.⁴⁷ Indigenous people's deep knowledge of and connection to rural and remote land in BC has been resilient in the face of historic and contemporary challenges.⁴⁸ The first State of Rural Canada noted that unlike most provinces in Canada, BC has considerable areas where land was not ceded by Indigenous peoples and has not been settled through treaty negotiations. BC's Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous organizations such as the British Columbia Assembly of First Nations and other governmental organizations, is working to renew treaty-making in BC with a focus on lasting but flexible government-to-government relationships that recognize the inherent rights of Indigenous people.⁴⁹ BC is the first province in Canada to recognize Indigenous peoples' human rights in BC law²² in alignment with The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada: Calls to Action⁵⁰ which confirmed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation in Canada.

Colonial constructs such as reserves, residential schools, prohibitions on Indigenous ceremonies, and discriminatory child welfare regulation have had lasting and intergenerational effects. These are particularly pervasive at the intersection of Indigeneity, gender, and rurality.⁵¹ Indigenous women and girls report violent victimizations at a rate 2.7 times higher than that reported by non-Indigenous women and girls.⁵² Travel to and from isolated communities is risky. Hitchhiking is often a necessity because there are no transportation alternatives. Many areas also lack cell coverage for emergencies. Dozens of women and girls, most of whom are Indigenous, have been murdered or gone missing since the 1970s on BC's Highway 16 between Prince George and Prince Rupert.⁵³ The Red Dress movement calls for transformative legal and social changes to address the systemic origins of violence against Indigenous women and girls.⁵⁴ There are many stories of resilience and innovation from Indigenous peoples across BC, like that of Indigenous language revitalization as previously discussed in case study #2.

Change as the New Normal

There have been notable periods of stability in British Columbia's past, but this is no longer the case. The global pace of change is too rapid. If we look to the past five years, there were trends, and then there were COVID trends – and the changes happen quickly. What would have previously been seen as once in a generation shifts in technology now occur regularly. Cumulative impacts enhance complexity. Change, and uncertainty, is the new normal. Of all the lessons learned or practices needed for the future, the ability of senior governments and rural communities to adapt quickly is the most important. BC's rural communities have shown resiliency before and during COVID-19 and have the potential to continue adapting and thriving in a dynamic future.

Record floods and wildfires, forest sector crisis, climate change, a global pandemic – these are by and large outside the direct control of rural communities. But communities can control how prepared they are to face these challenges. In response to COVID-19, there has been a staggering number of community-led initiatives from across rural BC. While there were similarities in the types of activities, the differences in their approach and execution highlights unique differences in place – and how understanding place, combined with resources and capacity, can have substantial local benefits. By engaging in proactive planning and capacity building, including building regional networks and working collaboratively with senior government, rural communities will be able to adapt to new situations.

Upper level governments need to build an explicit understanding of rural into policy and program design. This is important in order to prevent unintended consequences, as well as to reduce the barriers that prevent rural communities, businesses, and individuals from accessing government programs. This understanding can be built through tools and data, through co-construction of policy and programs, and also through lived experience. Rural BC may be home to government operational staff, but rarely have government policy staff existed outside Victoria or Ottawa, something COVID-19 has demonstrated is possible through working remotely. Enabling increased presence of senior governments in rural BC is one avenue through which to build an understanding of the variation across rural into policy.

Final Thoughts

The accelerated pace of change continues to be borne out in reality. In the short time since the initial writing of this chapter, BC has advanced to Phase 3 of the provincial COVID-19 restart plan. As the Province re-opens, we are seeing a changed landscape, one where digital skills and services continue to play an increasingly important role. Uncovering the remains of hundreds of children at the site of former residential schools – including two in BC to date – has underscored the need for action on reconciliation. The climate vulnerability of rural communities has been demonstrated through the severity of the 2021 wildfire season and devastation of Lytton, BC.

Whether rural, urban, Indigenous, non-Indigenous - all British Columbians come from resilient people and we thank our resilient ancestors through actions that support the well-being of our people and places.⁴⁸ Thinking of the trends, challenges, and opportunities discussed in this chapter and looking forward, we invite readers to consider:

- Climate change will continue to impact rural BC in new and potentially devastating ways. Rural communities need to work collaboratively to build resilience.

- BC's natural resource sectors will continue to be a critically important component of the rural landscape. However – these sectors will no longer operate as they have in the past, requiring communities and individuals to adapt.

- The ubiquity of connectivity in all aspects of daily life makes rural broadband access critical. It is unacceptable to have such unevenness in the level of services across BC.

- All levels of government need to work together to co-construct flexible and place-based policies and programs that recognize the variability of rural needs, capacity, and priorities.

- Long-term rural resilience requires true reconciliation, a process that will take time and broad, ongoing commitment to collaborative action as Indigenous peoples continue to practice self-determination.

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